One semester in, Loyola pleased with launch of weekend J.D. program

First cohort of 43 able to pursue degrees, retain existing Monday-to-Friday routine

By Lauren P. Duncan

When 29-year-old Chicagoan Clare Kosinski thought about pursuing a law degree, the idea of setting her full-time job on the back burner wasn’t ideal. But when Kosinski, who handles contracts for an actor’s union, heard about Loyola University Chicago School of Law’s new weekend J.D. program, she decided she could have both. Kosinski is one of 43 students, including many from outside Chicago, who participated in the inaugural semester of the school’s new weekend program that began last fall. Through the program, students are able to earn a J.D. in over three years by taking classes on every other weekend.

In Kosinski’s case, the routine has accommodated her work schedule at the Actor’s Equity Association. Kosinski, who has a Master of Fine Arts in creative producing for film and video, decided she’d like to study law after finding she enjoyed much of the writing and researching involved in her work as a contract associate.

She’s among several students in the program who took a less-traditional route toward law. In its first semester, the program attracted students from a variety of professional backgrounds, including a doctor, dentists, a farmer, wealth managers, two Illinois state legislators, stay-at-home parents, university leaders, a NASA engineer and more, ranging in age from 22 to 66. About 32 percent of the students travel to Chicago for class from out of town, including three who fly in—or “plane pool”—from Houston.

Following the first semester and looking ahead at enrollment projections for next year, Loyola Interim Dean Michael J. Kaufman said he expects the program to become a part of the future of legal education—not just at Loyola, but at other law schools—after the success the school has seen.

The inspiration for the program dates back to the school’s founding, Kaufman explained. When the school was established in 1908, its classes were first offered as a part-time evening program. The goal, Kaufman said, was to provide opportunities to students who otherwise couldn’t attend law school due to financial, family and work commitments.

Part-time evening courses continued to remain an essential part of the school’s offerings, Kaufman said, until recent years when Loyola as well as schools across the country saw a drop in their enrollment in evening programs. The program is designed in a way that students attend class every other weekend for seven weekends during the semester.

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“Throughout the country, over the last eight years or so, the enrollments in evening programs have declined dramatically for all kinds of reasons, so we were faced with the choice of how to be true to our mission to educate students who couldn’t otherwise spare time to go to law school full-time in a way that was actually engaging. A flexible schedule that was more accommodating to their work and life needs,” Kaufman said.

“We took a leap of faith, we took some risks in developing an innovative new program, and that always carries some risk.”

Nadia N. Sawicki

The law school did some market research to look at the attractiveness of different schedule options, in which the school examined the question: “Could we proactively create a way to attract the same kind of students who want to really pursue this kind of career path but didn’t have the time to devote to it during the week?”

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“The real focus of the program was to make the same exact rigorous, high-quality Loyola University of Chicago J.D. available to a broader and more diverse array of students who couldn’t go full-time during the week but who might be able to go every other weekend and the weekends,” Kaufman said.

“That was the goal… and we have greatly exceeded even our wildest expectations.”

Designing the program required considering some logistics. For example, several students fly into Chicago from out of town. To accommodate those students, the school has offered some financial aid packages that help cover travel and housing costs, and it has secured rooms at two hotels and a graduate-student residence at discounted rates.

To further accommodate students, the school offers breakfast and lunch on the weekends and teachers who aren’t teaching will come in on the weekends to meet students, which Kaufman said has created a close-knit community among the students in the program.

Another logistical challenge for some students might involve the simple fact that the program involves long stretches of time in the classroom, which Kaufman said hasánd is faced with the challenge of how to be true to our mission to educate students who couldn’t otherwise spare time to go to law school full-time in a way that was actually engaging. A flexible schedule that was more accommodating to their work and life needs,” Kaufman said.

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The curriculum is designed in a structure known as blended learning, in which a portion of the classes are conducted online while the bulk of the time students spend in a physical classroom.

The 43 students in the fall semester was larger than any cohort of students the school has seen in its part-time evening program in several years, Kaufman said. It was nearly triple the number of students the school had in its previous year’s evening program.

“Then means I can do...
things that are really phenomenal for learning, which involve application of the material to real life practice skills.”

In the case of Kaufman’s civil procedure class, the course lasts from 11:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Saturdays. That period includes a lunch break and other shorter breaks throughout the day.

The class is anything but a five-hour lecture, though, Kaufman emphasized, as he incorporates role-playing, collaborative projects and other experiential learning exercises that he doesn’t typically have time for in a traditional weekday class schedule.

“It’s intensive, but the students are never sitting still,” he said. “There’s a lot of movement throughout the day, a lot of small group and large group activity that rotates, a lot of collaboration that goes on, a lot of actual arguing motions and drafting complaints and taking depositions. There’s very little passive learning that goes on, and so therefore it’s very engaging and students do not ever become bored, I think, or overwhelmed with the amount of class time.”

Kaufman said the fact that the school has offered online programs for about 10 years meant it already had some of the foundation laid for offering the one-third of classes that are taught online.

A good amount of preparation went into developing the curriculum to specifically meet the new format, though, said Sawicki. She said she spent much of last summer developing the curriculum for her torts class last fall.

Sawicki said one reason she likes the Weekend J.D. model is because students come into class with an understanding of the material through the online portion of class.

“Since some of the learning is moved online outside of the physical classroom, it gives me a lot more of an opportunity to work on those real lawyering skills in the classroom,” she said.

Like with students in the school’s former evening program, Sawicki said the students in the Weekend J.D. program, many with careers or other commitments they’re maintaining during the week, are committed to their education, which she said translates into why the program is seeing success.

“The program really opens up opportunities to people who thought law school isn’t on the table. There’s probably a large population of people who maybe have an interest in the law who maybe a couple of years ago thought about pursuing it when they graduated from undergraduate and thought, ‘There’s no way I can do this,’” she said. “It is possible.”

Kaufman expressed his gratitude to the law school community who made the program possible, including those who have come in on the weekends to make it happen.

“I really believe that it is now a phenomenal success in every imaginable way,” he said. “We took a leap of faith, we took some risks in developing an innovative new program, and that always carries some risk. The risk has been rewarded over and over again already. I’m certain it is at least part of the future of legal education, and to be at the forefront of that as a law school that serves its mission in doing so is beyond wonderful.”